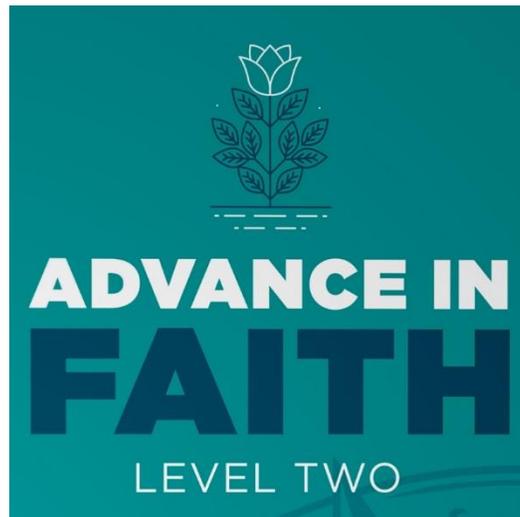


Reading the Bible

Advance in Faith Unit 107



Lesson 4 – Interpreting Scripture – Part 3

1/ Introduction – so far

2/ Exegesis – Deeper Study (continued)

The Literary Style

This refers to the type of literature that you are reading. The Bible has a number of different types of literature;

Poetry

After narratives, poetry is the most common literary form in the Bible.

Types of poetry include;

- i. Prayer - Psalm 22
- ii. Songs – Ps. 30 a thanksgiving song
- iii. Liturgies – A liturgy is a text used in worship where two or more speakers participate in response to each other. E.G. Ps. 118
- iv. Wisdom Psalms – These are songs that focus on ethical issues such as the justice of human suffering and God’s apparent injustice in tolerating it. They were not publicly used but used in private by ‘wisdom teachers’. Ps. 19

Interpreting Poetry

1. Poems are complete units of work and should be interpreted in their entirety rather than verse by verse. The author uses creative images and emotionally evocative language.
2. Each poem, if it is a psalm, is its own context.
3. Historical context is still important.
4. Usage is important in interpretation. Its design for public use or private use will impact the interpretation.
5. Contemporary use should coincide with the poem’s original purpose, occasion, and speakers.

Recognising poetry in the New Testament can be difficult. Some translations are better than others at allowing us to recognise poetry.

Exodus 14 and 15 are great examples of the difference between prose and poetry. Chapter 14 describes the event of Pharaoh drowning trying to recapture the Israelites. Chapter 15 is the same event described in song.

Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic literature deals with eschatology (ἔσχατος, *eschatos*, “last things”). This type of writing was especially prevalent from approximately 200 BC to AD 200, starting with Jewish writings and eventually including the work of Christians.

The apocalyptic genre contains a revelation within a narrative framework. The revelation is given to a human being by an otherworldly mediator who unveils a supernatural reality, along with the means by which humanity can become a part of it.

Typically it contains mythic, chaotic imagery, often hearkening back to ancient Near Eastern traditions and described again in apocalyptic language. At the end of the great battle, God is truly triumphant, as He was in the beginning of the universe.¹

Of course the best examples of this are Daniel and Revelation.

Parables

This genre is known as narrative fiction. It tells a story but not a ‘real’ story; not a story that really happened. These are stories founded in the realities of life around the hearers but within the story there are glaring examples of people acting in ways that would definitely NOT be the case in reality.

For many years parables were taken as being allegories; that is each detail of the story represented something.

In interpreting parables it is vital to position the parable within the context of the discussion in which we find it and to remain aware of the audience to which it is being said.

Luke 16:19-31 is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The point of the story not to teach about heaven and hell but is to;

1. Remind the Jews that they have seen, and will see great miracles but will they believe?

¹ D. A. Neal, “Apocalyptic Literature, Introduction to,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

2. Point out that each person is responsible for his or her own decision in relationship to God and their fellow man.

Proverbs

Proverbs were a way of teaching life principles. They were designed to be learnt off by heart so as to be guiding principles in the life of the person in all circumstances.

A proverb, therefore, is a *brief, particular* expression of a truth. The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable. We know that long, highly qualified, elaborate, detailed statements of fact are not only often difficult to understand but very difficult to remember. So the proverbs are phrased in a catchy way, so as to be memorable. Indeed, in Hebrew many of the proverbs have some sort of rhythm, sound repetition, or vocabulary qualities that make them particularly easy to learn.²

Proverbs must be understood reasonably and taken on their own terms. They do not state everything about a truth, but they point *toward* it. They are, taken literally, often technically inexact. But as learnable guidelines for the shaping of selected behaviour, they are unsurpassed.³

When interpreting proverbs it is important to remember the following;

Put simply, proverbs teach probable truth, not absolute truth. By nature, proverbs are not absolute promises from God that guarantee the promised outcome if one follows them. Rather, they point out patterns of conduct that, if followed, give one the best chance of success, all things being equal.⁴

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 232.

³ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 233.

⁴ William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 389-90.

Narrative

We will consider narrative as a full session next week.

The Questions of Content

“Content has to do with the meaning of the words, the grammatical relationships in the sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts differ from one another.”⁵

Examples:

A Sabbath day’s journey Acts 1:12

A ‘denarius’ Matthew 20:2

Understanding the meaning of content is especially true when we are considering the New Testament as so much of the language and the expressions were very familiar to the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking or to whom Paul was writing, but as readers today we are much less familiar with them.

Examples:

The stories of vineyards Jesus used had great meaning for the Jews not so much because of the agricultural society in which they lived, but because Israel as a vineyard is an especially potent picture used throughout the Old Testament, most often in Isaiah.

Matthew 11:7

Some understanding of sentence structure, grammar, is also useful in gaining an understanding of a text.

2 Corinthians 5:16

3/ Hermeneutics

This is simply asking, “What is the contemporary relevance of ancient texts?” When applied to Bible reading, Fee and Stuart ask the question, “what is the Bible’s meaning in the here and now?”

⁵ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all it’s Worth* (Zondervan, 2003, Grand Rapids) p28

“The reason you must *not begin* with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the original intent of the biblical text.*”⁶

Remember the first rule!

Scripture was written for us not to us.

Possibly the biggest challenge here is the problem of cultural relativity – what is cultural and therefore belongs to the culture of the time of the writing alone and what transcends culture and is thus a Word for all seasons?

Fee and Stuart point out that, “we bring our enlightened common sense to the text and apply what we can to our own situation. What does not seem to apply is simply left in the first century.”⁷(Referring to the New Testament)

2 Timothy 4:9-13

2 Timothy 2:22

Group Questions:

1. Share some scriptures that have had a significant impact on your life.
2. From your homework during the week, did you discover any ‘wow’ moments?
3. Does understanding ‘context’ help in your understanding of these verses:
 - a. Matthew 5:29
 - b. 1 Cor. 15:18
 - c. Jer. 29:11
4. Read 1 Cor. 15:35-49 and then the following piece from Tom Wright’s commentary. Discuss any thoughts you may have.

Imagine standing outside a car showroom, a hundred or more years from now. An advertisement has brought you and lots of others to see a new type of car. Different from all that went before, the slogan had said.

‘Looks pretty much the same to me,’ says one person.

‘Well, it’s similar,’ replies another, ‘but the engine seems different somehow.’

⁶ Ibid. P29

⁷ Ibid. p73

The inventor makes a short speech.

‘I know it may look like an ordinary car,’ he says, ‘but what makes this one totally different is what it runs on. We’ve developed a new fuel, nothing to do with oil or petrol. It’s clean, it’s safe, and there are limitless supplies. And because of the type of fuel, the engine will never wear out. This car is going to last forever.’

A fantasy, of course—or perhaps not, since you never know what inventions are going to come next (who in 1880 would have predicted the jet engine or the microchip?). But it gets us to the point of this long, dense and hugely important discussion. What sort of a body will the **resurrection** produce? And what will it ‘run’ on?

We may as well go to the heart of the passage, to the verse that has puzzled people many times in the past, and still does. In verse 44 Paul contrasts the two types of bodies, the present one and the resurrection one. The words he uses are technical and tricky. Many versions translate these words as ‘physical body’ and ‘spiritual body’, but this is highly misleading. That is as though the difference between the old car and the new one was that, whereas the old one was *made of* steel, the new one is *made of* something quite different—plastic, say, or wood, or some as-yet-uninvented metal alloy. If you go that route, you may well end up saying, as many have done, that Paul is making a contrast simply between what we call a ‘body’, that is a physical object, and what we might call a ghost, a ‘spiritual’ object in the sense of ‘non-physical’. But that is exactly what he is *not* saying.

The contrast he’s making is between a body *animated by* one type of **life** and a body animated by another type. The difference between them is found, if you like, in what the two bodies run on. The present body is animated by the normal life which all humans share. The word Paul uses for this often means ‘**soul**’; he means it in the sense of the ordinary life-force on which we all depend in this present body, the ordinary energy that keeps us breathing and our blood circulating. But the body that we shall be given in the resurrection is to be animated by God’s own **spirit**. This is what Paul says in a simpler passage, Romans 8:10–11: the spirit of Jesus the **Messiah** dwells within you at the moment, and God will give life to your mortal bodies through this spirit who lives inside you.

But when the spirit creates a new body, it won’t wear out. Here, in order to make the illustration of the new car really work, we would have to say that the new fuel will not only preserve the engine for ever, but the bodywork too. That would be straining even fantasy-imagination a bit far. But we need to say something like that to do justice to what Paul has written here.

Paul does in fact think that the resurrection body will be a different kind of thing to the present one, because in verses 51 and 52, and again in Philippians 3:20–21, he declares that Christians who have not died at the moment when Jesus returns as Lord will need to be *changed*. But the

contrast he then makes between the present body in itself, and the future body in itself, is not the contrast between ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’. That, as we’ve seen, has to do with what energizes these two bodies, what they run on. The contrast between the two bodies in themselves is stated in verses 42 and 43. It is the contrast between corruption (our present bodies fall sick, bits wear out, we decay, die, and return to dust) and incorruption (the new body won’t do any of those things). It is the contrast between shame (we know we were made for more than this decaying, corrupting life, and we are ashamed of frailty and death) and honour (the new body will be splendid, with nothing to be ashamed of). It is the contrast between weakness and power.⁸

Take Home Exercise:

1. Choose one of the synoptic gospels and in one or two sittings read the story through, just concentrating on the flow of the story.

Memory Work:

John 5:39 (New International Version)

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me...."

⁸ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 220–222.